If America worships success, then why has the nation’s literature dwelled obsessively on failure? This book explores encounters with failure by nineteenth-century writers – ranging from Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville to Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett – whose celebrated works more often struck readers as profoundly messy, flawed, and even perverse. Reading textual inconsistency against the backdrop of a turbulent nineteenth century, Gavin Jones describes how the difficulties these writers faced in their faltering search for new styles, coherent characters, and satisfactory endings uncovered experiences of blunder and inadequacy hidden in the culture at large. Through Jones’s treatment, these American writers emerge as the great theorists of failure who discovered ways to translate their own social insecurities into complex portrayals of a modern self, founded in moral fallibility, precarious knowledge, and negative feelings.

Gavin Jones is Professor of English at Stanford University, where he currently serves as department chair. A former Junior Fellow in Harvard University’s Society of Fellows, Jones is the author of Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America (1999) and American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945 (2007). He has published numerous articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature in journals such as American Literary History, African American Review, and New England Quarterly.
FAILURE AND THE AMERICAN WRITER

A Literary History

GAVIN JONES

Stanford University
For Hazel and Eli –
Be warned!
“A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.”

Gertrude Stein
# Contents

| List of Illustrations                      | x   |
| Acknowledgments                           | xi  |
| Introduction: Henry Adams and the Catastrophic Century | 1   |
| 1 Falling for Edgar Allan Poe             | 17  |
| 2 Herman Melville in the Doldrums         | 35  |
| 3 The Disappointments of Henry David Thoreau | 60  |
| 4 Stephen Crane’s Fake War                | 75  |
| 5 The Double Failure of Mark Twain        | 95  |
| 6 Sarah Orne Jewett Falling Short         | 112 |
| 7 The Faltering Style of Henry James      | 133 |
| Conclusion                               | 153 |

**Notes** 163  
**Index** 187
Illustrations

1.1 Portrait of Clarence King (c. 1881).
1.2 Joseph Jefferson playing Rip Van Winkle, by Napoleon Sarony (1869).
1.1 Portrait of Edgar Allan Poe, by W. S. Hartshorn (1848).
1.3 Original illustration to Poe’s “Balloon-Hoax” (1844).
2.1 Portrait of General Peter Gansevoort, by Gilbert Stuart (c. 1794).
2.2 Portrait of Herman Melville, by Rodney Dewey (1861).
3.1 Table of accounts, from Henry David Thoreau’s Walden (1854).
3.2 “Reduced Plan,” from Walden.
5.1 The Paige compositor (1901).
5.2 Marginal illustration to Mark Twain’s Those Extraordinary Twins (1894).
6.1 Portrait of Sarah Orne Jewett.
6.2 Jewett’s signature.
This project grew mostly in communal and workshop settings. I am grateful to the staff and Fellows of the Stanford Humanities Center for a wonderfully productive year of fellowship in 2010–11. For their encouragement and advice, I would like to thank Heather Love, Richard White, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, Sianne Ngai, Mark McGurl, Keith Gandal, Michele Elam, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Nancy Ruttenburg, Aron Rodrigue, Katja Zelljadt, Vaughn Rasberry, Paula Moya, Stephen Sohn, Alex Woloch, Augusta Rohrbach, Gordon Chang, Harris Feinsod, William Leidy, Scott Saul, Blakey Vermeule, James Wood, Alison MacKeen, Alexander Whitrlyn Jacobs, Alexander Nemerov, and Sarah Carey. Several of my chapters saw the light of day on conference panels, including the MLA Annual Convention panel “Depressions,” organized by Gordon Hutner in 2009; the MLA Annual Convention panel “Literature and Economic Crisis,” organized by Samuel Otter in 2011; and the two “American Ruins” panels, organized by Susan Gilman in 2012 at the Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists Conference in Berkeley, California, and at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Other sections of the manuscript benefited from presentations at the Stanford/Berkeley Graduate Student Conference (2012), at the Stanford English Department’s Pragmatism Working Group, at the Center for the Study of the Novel’s Working Group on the Novel, and at a special meeting of Michele Elam’s “Introduction to Graduate Studies” class in 2012.

A remarkable group of graduate students in the Stanford English Department has provided input throughout; special thanks to Josh Mann, Morgan Frank, and Hannah Walser. I am grateful to Debra Satz for the invitation to present some of my work in the Ethics of Wealth lecture series, organized by Stanford’s Program in Ethics and Society, in 2012. At Cambridge University Press I have benefited from the vision and guidance of Ross Posnock, and from Ray Ryan’s exemplary work as an editor. An earlier version of Chapter 1 appeared as “Poor Poe: On the Literature
Acknowledgments

of Revulsion” in American Literary History 23: 1 (Spring 2011), 1–18, published by Oxford University Press and reprinted here with permission. David Zimmerman’s commentary in the same issue of ALH proved useful in revision. Ellen Yoshi Tani provided deft handling of the illustrations and permissions. Morgan Frank, John Mustain, and Alyce Boster also helped. The amazing staff of the Stanford English Department have offered constant support in my attempt to balance scholarship with my current role as department chair. As always, my deepest gratitude goes to Judy Richardson and to our beloved children, Eli and Hazel, who have come to understand the crisis ordinariness of an academic career.